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SUBJECT: TIBET: LHASA MUSLIMS' RESURGING IDENTITY, WARY RELATIONS
WITH TAR GOVERNMENT

REF: A. A) 09 CHENGDU 228; B) 09 CHENGDU 257; C) 09 CHENGDU 288;
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¶11. (SBU) This cable is Sensitive But Unclassified. Not for
Internet distribution.

¶12. (SBU) Summary. Lhasa's small but energetic community of
Muslims, both ethnic Tibetan and from other regions of China, is
closely monitored by the government of the Tibet Autonomous
Region (TAR), CG's recent visits suggest. A resurging interest
in Islam among Tibet's Muslims appears to have coincided with
Beijing's more relaxed policies toward religions in general in
the 1980s and 90s. The TAR government has refused to allow new
mosques to open. Parents have been home schooling their
children in the Koran; there is an increasingly strong
self-identification of young Muslims in Tibet with their
religion. Imams in Lhasa receive their theological training
primarily in Nepal and India's Kashmir region, and maintain ties
to friends and family members there, some of whom are Tibetan
exiles. End Summary.

¶13. (U) Introduction: As part of an on-going effort to gauge the
state of religious freedom in southwest China, CG visited the
two largest mosques in Lhasa in October, and returned to one of
the two mosques during an early February stay in the Tibetan
capital. Reflets reported on Buddhist monasteries in Tibet, and
Protestant and Catholic churches in Sichuan and Yunnan. Septels
will also report on meetings with Christians and Muslims in
Yunnan, Guizhou, and Chongqing.

¶II. Lhasa's "Big Mosque":

Imam Nervous About Religious Affairs Bureau Official

¶14. (SBU) During an impromptu, October 22 visit to Lhasa's
largest mosque, CG first introduced himself to "Abdul," who
happened to be one of the TAR government's Religious Affairs
Bureau (RAB) officials, as well as a member of the mosque's
Democratic Management Committee (DMC, or "minjianhui"). The RAB

official then introduced CG to the mosque's head Imam, "Yakob."

¶ 15. (SBU) Imam Yakob explained that there were 4-5000 Muslims in Lhasa, and said that the mosque freely enjoyed interaction with Muslims from other regions of China. The Imam said that he had relatives living in Kashmir, India; Pakistan; Nepal; and Saudi Arabia, as well as a brother in Lhasa who had studied in the United Arab Emirates. Yakob, who appeared to be nervous but friendly, explained that the mosque's DMC only concerned itself with "administration," and "left religion to the Imams." He expressed support for the TAR government's patriotic education of the mosque's Imams because "We are all Chinese, and the country needs citizens that love it." Government officials come "to see if the mosque is OK, and ask how they can help," he explained. Tibetan Muslims are a (religious) minority within a minority (ethnic Tibetans as part of China), Yakob said, recalling that in the past there had been tensions between Tibetan Muslims and Buddhists. For this reason, the Imam explained, Muslims in Lhasa try hard to maintain cordial relations with Buddhist leaders.

¶ 16. (SBU) When CG asked whether there were any limits on the number of Muslims in his mosque who could make the pilgrimage (the "hajj") to Mecca, Yakob replied bluntly that "I can't say anything on that." (Note: At one point, the Imam called Abdul, the RAB official, into the semi-private room to join CG -- perhaps to assure the official that he was not criticizing the TAR government. Abdul listened briefly, and then left the room. Shortly thereafter, mid-day prayers were about to start, and CG saw dozens of white capped Muslim men enter the mosque just as he left it. End Note.)

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II. October Visit to Second Lhasa Mosque:

Brief Encounter With Young Imam

¶ 17. (SBU) In October, CG also briefly visited a second, smaller mosque in Lhasa's old town not far from the main mosque. There, CG met Azizula, a 32-year old Imam whose father was also an Imam at the mosque. Azizula explained that he had studied Arabic and the Koran in Kashmir for 14 years in a town "one-day train ride from the border (with China)." Azizula estimated that, over the years, as many as 90 members of his mosque had applied to go on the hajj, but that only 20 had been allowed to go. The cost of traveling to Mecca is expensive: 40,000 RMB (5900 USD), the Imam explained.

¶ 18. (SBU) When CG asked a question about the mosque's relations with the TAR government, Imam Azizula's father-in-law called out from the adjacent kitchen that he should not answer the question. Nevertheless, Azizula offered to allow CG to return that Friday to meet the DMC and ask them questions directly. Before CG departed, Azizula explained that the DMC had eight members, five of who were from the government, and three from the mosque, including its senior imams. (Note: Because of a tight schedule, CG was not able to meet the DMC in October, but returned in February. End Note.)

III. Return Engagement: A Senior Imam (Mostly) Speaks His Mind

¶9. (SBU) During a second visit to the smaller mosque on February 1, CG met Imam Hamid Dulla, who appeared to be in his 40s or 50s. Imam Dulla provided somewhat higher estimates of Lhasa's Muslim community than had Imam Yakob: 4-5000 ethnic Tibetan Muslims, and 2-3000 Muslims from other regions of China, including from the Huizu ethnic minority, as well as non-Hui Muslims from Gansu and Qinghai. Dulla explained that Lhasa had five mosques: the so-called "Big Mosque of Lhasa" (also visited by CG), his "Small Mosque of Lhasa," and three other mosques that were even smaller than his "Small Mosque." About 10-15 faithful visit his mosque daily, except for Friday, when approximately 600 attend prayers.

Government Refusing to Allow New Mosques

¶10. (SBU) Dulla's mosque was repaired, expanded, and reopened in 1999 after receiving government permission and financial aid to do so, he said. However, the TAR government will not allow additional mosques to open in Lhasa, the Imam stated categorically. The only reason that this mosque was allowed to open, he explained, was because it had been an existing mosque with over 400 years of history (before being closed by the PRC government, probably either after the Dalai Lama and many Tibetan Muslims fled in 1959, or during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s). (Comment: Similarly, Protestant pastors have told us that most current church buildings in Sichuan are those that reopened in recent years. While some new church buildings are being approved, the process can be difficult depending on the locality. End Comment.)

¶11. (SBU) The mosque has not established close relations with mosques outside of Tibet, or with Muslims abroad, Dulla stated. Some foreign Muslims visiting Lhasa, e.g. from Pakistan, are surprised to learn that there are mosques there, and occasionally donate money. When the mosque was being rebuilt

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and expanded in the 1990s, many of Imam Dulla's relatives in Lhadak, Kashmir provided donations. (Note: Many of the Tibetan Muslims who fled to India with the Dalai Lama in 1959 settled with him in Dharmsala, Himachal Pradesh, or in Kashmir. Imam Dulla's relatives may be among these exiles. End Note.)

Koranic Instruction of Faithful:

Informal and Mainly in Tibetan; Imams Mainly Study in Nepal

¶12. (SBU) Dulla's mosque has eight Imams, two of whom are recognized by the RAB and have received an "Imam certificates" (ahengzheng). The mosque does not have a school to teach Arabic or the Koran. When asked why, Dulla explained that most member-parents of the mosque feel that if their children spent their time learning Arabic, they would have less time to study Chinese, and therefore less opportunity to find a good job.

¶13. (SBU) Comment: Given that Arabic and Chinese are both challenging languages, the Imam's explanation may be partly accurate. However, but we also believe the TAR government is nervous about allowing Koranic schools. Virtually all of mosques in Shadian, Yunnan that we visited in January had schools (septel). This small mosque in Lhasa had an unusually large numbers of Imams who could teach -- eight -- yet there was no school attached to the mosque. It is possible that the Imams, in fact, provide instruction on the Koran beyond prayer services, but do so informally. End Comment.

¶14. (SBU) Dulla explained that, for eight years, he had studied Arabic in Nepal, where there were several "Arabic" (Koranic) schools. The mosque's seven other imams also studied in Nepal. If talented, he said, some students at Koranic schools in Nepal are invited to continue their studies in Saudi Arabia (and presumably supported financially by the Saudi government or some other Islamic organization there).

Government: Close Monitoring and Guidance
to Mosque; Quotas on Muslims Going to Mecca

¶15. (SBU) Dulla explained that the mosque's DMC consisted of seven members, three of whom were retired cadres, and two of whom were from the RAB. Every week, two RAB officials also observe Friday prayers. Disingenuously, the Imam expressed support for the presence of these RAB officials, which he said was necessary so that the Government could "monitor" the mosque. "One never knows when security incidents could occur that would threaten social stability," he explained, adding that after the March 2008 unrest by Buddhist Tibetans, some people tried to attack the mosque.

¶16. (SBU) The mosque also receives regular "guidance" from the TAR government regarding e.g. how to promote social stability, ethnic solidarity, and religious harmony. Finally, RAB officials periodically carry out special "official" education campaigns, e.g. before big festivals. (Note: CG has visited about a dozen Buddhist monasteries in Tibet, all but the smallest of which also had DMCs. With two active and three retired government officials out of eight DMC committee members, this mosque had the highest ratio of government official per religious leader of any DMC so far. End Note.)

¶17. (SBU) The Chinese government, through its China Islamic Association in Beijing, grants each mosque in China a quota of how many of their members can make the pilgrimage (hajj) to Mecca. For Lhasa's "Small Mosque," only two members per year can go, although this can change from year to year. Imam Dulla

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stated that, every year, 50-60 of his members wished to make the hajj. When asked why the Chinese government did not allow many more than two to go to Mecca every year, however, he stated that very few of these members actually had enough money to do so.

¶118. (SBU) Imam Dulla explained that he was born after the 1950s, and had little knowledge of what the Tibetan Muslim community was like before the Chinese took control of Tibet. He felt, however, the quality of religious education that Tibetans Imams receive now is better than in the 1950s, and that the number of Tibetan Muslims now was greater than before. Dulla also felt that Muslim youth in Tibet had a much stronger self-identification as Muslims now than 10-20 years earlier. This in part reflected the fact that many Tibetan Muslim parents had been providing their children with better home instruction about the Koran. The Imam explained that most Tibetan Muslims study the Koran in Tibetan, those who can't read Tibetan mainly study it in Chinese, and the relatively few who read Arabic do so in that language. The Imam also felt that the parents had an increasingly stronger self-identification as Muslims, which in turn was made possible in part because of more relaxed policies toward religion by the PRC government in recent years.

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